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ABSTRACT

The basic assumptions of a society bear directly on the kinds of schooling and education that it has, including the ways that it develops or beleaguers academic talent. In the United States, the pervasive influence of capitalism, which is predicated on limitless growth, tends to equate affluence with academic talent. By imagining futures for gifted students that mirror the aspirations of the affluent and elite, the field of gifted education is complicit in the economic and cultural impoverishment of rural areas by encouraging gifted rural students to leave their communities, which are viewed as backward and impoverished. American society equates job-holding with work, and separates work from play, so that achieving happiness through work is denied. This contrasts with Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," a feeling of well-being experienced when absorbed in the care and attention given to work. Key points to consider in regard to rural gifted education and keeping gifted kids in rural areas include: concentrate on academic talent, defined as careful reading, clear writing, and mathematics through statistics and calculus; help gifted kids finish 13 years of schooling in 10 or less; discount the value of a college education; stop promoting the pursuit of happiness and promote the pursuit of real work; consider what the good life means to you; understand the meanings of rural in your place; and promote the good life in your own place as a rural work. Contains 14 references. (TD)

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Academically Able Rural Kids: How to Keep Them on the Farm When You Can't Even Keep Farming

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Invited Address at The Inaugural Wallace Family National Conference on Gifted Education in Rural Schools

University of Iowa, Iowa City

May 21, 1999

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Academically Able Rural Kids: How to Keep Them on the Farm When You Can't Even Keep Farming

I've written an actual speech because, alas, I really can't talk. It's not a paper, though, and it sounds like what I would say if I could talk. It has subheadings throughout, just like a paper, and I'm going to read them as I come along them, so you'll know when I change gears. Consider yourselves lucky, though: I won't be reading the reference list.

Thank You

Thank you for hearing my speech. I hope you'll **hear it out**, in fact. It's a very personal view.

Thanks also, Nick and Susan, for the surprise invitation to speak. Nobody has ever asked me to put the rural education half of my life together with the gifted education half.

Of course, no one has **listened** to **anything** our team has said about gifted education--that is, our team of Aimee Howley, Edwina Pendarvis, and me. Together, the three of us have written a couple of completely obscure and basically out-of-print gifted ed textbooks and, more recently, a critically praised but equally ignored volume titled *Out of Our Minds: Anti-intellectualism in American Schooling*.

At least, that's what I think it's called. I forget. Not

just titles, but all too often what I said or meant to say in things I've written. But that's why I write in the first place, to find out what I know and what I think, momentarily anyhow. Lots of writers think this, but they don't often share the thought with the unsuspecting public upon whom their works are inflicted. Everything with us—and I mean "us humans"--is a work in progress. Don't forget that. It means that our works and not our brains make education possible.

Sometimes a Great Notion

Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* used to be my favorite novel. It's a rural story, actually. The title echoes lyrics that go: "Sometimes I live in the country, sometimes I live in town; sometimes, I get a great notion to jump in the river and drown." From my own life, I can tell you that the experience of living in the country but then in town is pretty depressing.

So, sometimes I get a great notion myself.

Sometimes I get a great notion to tell people I'm a commie. People don't usually know what to make of this assertion. Often, I don't know what to make of it either. But when I feel that way, I smell bridges burning.

However, I do believe, and have believed for a very long time now, that our political economy is structured from top to bottom to impoverish some people, many of us, and to vastly enrich other people, but very few of us. In this view, penury

and riches are not in our genes, and not in our stars, but in the way we do business with one another. In other words, poverty, racism, and injustice generally are not merely the result of fear, ignorance, and laziness. They are kind of on purpose.

Now, living modestly--which is one kind of poverty--is not a bad thing. By contrast, however, living extravagantly is ethically, aesthetically, and politically suspicious. It is certainly suspicious economically. Extravagance is bad household management—which is the root meaning of that misunderstood word. Everyone from Lao Tzu to Plato to Jesus to Hannah Arendt to Wendell Berry knows this. And yet they all agree that the essential threat to living well, whether one be rich or poor, is thoughtlessness. This means we need to understand thoughtfulness.

Often people say that "thoughtfulness" expresses **two** ideas--an emotional attention and an intellectual attention. With me, however, the two overtones constitute the wholeness of one attitude--an attitude of care and attention to the confusion of relationships that inevitably confronts and confounds one.

Thoughtfulness, strangely, is always more of an **intention** than it is an **accomplishment**. The reason is that we must inevitably **limit** our attention and **focus** our care, otherwise the details will drive us mad.

But please note that the way we do business keeps us focused

on getting and spending, a distraction that makes attending and caring ever more difficult and ever less estimable. I have something quite specific and educational in mind. What comes next at this point is a difficult sentence.[1] So take a deep breath and listen up! Here goes:

> That suspicious structuring of the political economy by which some of us lead meager lives, and others lead lives that are grotesquely ample, is buttressed by the way we think about politics and economics and by the way we think about such questions as justice and the good life (and **yet further buttressed** by the way we too often teach and by the way we ourselves were often **taught** about such questions).

There, I hope that wasn't too bad. What does it mean, though? It means that American schooling is deeply complicit in economic and in cultural impoverishment.

Surprise! This is not what most of us educators have thought schooling was up to. Not at all. Quite the opposite. Of course, just making the observation, or even coming to believe it, doesn't necessarily mean we have to collaborate with such an unworthy purpose. Indeed, it should mean we need to oppose it, somehow, somewhere, sometime.

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1 One that summarizes bits of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jürgen Habermas all at once.

The places that capture my attention in this process of ongoing impoverishment (and opposition to it) are rural places, because of the important meanings that still issue from and inform lives that are still lived in our besieged places. But the impoverishment of which I try to speak is so widespread that it afflicts this most wealthy of nations from sea to shining sea. Some of the opposition needed in rural places would apply, but only in principle, to cities and even suburbs.[2]

This view, you should now realize, doesn't necessarily make me a commie, but maybe, with equal justification, a Taoist or even a Christian, a few minor details notwithstanding

In fact, Marty Strange has me working on what we together call "The Matthew Project." The title refers to a quote from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 12, verses 12-13. It goes like this, and it's an epigram for the way it seems to me the world is structured:

> To him that hath, shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

Even the Bureau of the Census is telling us that the rich are

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2 I doubt, though, that cities and suburbs are places, strictly speaking.

getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

The quote is part of a parable about stewardship. If we care for the world, says Jesus, we will thrive, but if we squander the world, God will reduce us to misery. The signs, take that suburb of Denver for instance, suggest to me that God is growing weary with us. Which is just another way of saying that we are not paying attention.

In my view, this struggle to enact a proper stewardship actually **constitutes** history and has **much** to do with the rise and fall of economic classes. Marx, of course, thought that the industrial proletariat was the destined class of history, the class that would lead the world to the good life. He could not, however, see far enough into the future to know that the industrial proletariat would seem less and less likely to play that role as the twentieth century unrolled. It may be that the destiny of the industrial proletariat-- like the class of small farmers and freeholders (sometimes called "peasants," or "crofters"), and the class of small shopkeepers and craftspeople (sometimes called "the petty bourgeoisie")-will be to disappear as strong influences within economic life. We might say "virtually disappear," since the disappearance has to do with the simulation of human craft by the machines into which we are increasingly inserting digital code. The only thing missing is care and attention.

The past 30 years have brought sharp changes to the class

structure in the allegedly developed world. At base, though, it's important to recognize that capitalism does not, and cannot, take stewardship seriously. The reason is that it is predicated on limitless growth, a condition neither natural nor human culture can sustain unbroken. The breaking has been going on for many generations already. God, by contrast, stopped after a mere six days.

The terms of economic contest and the terms in which we frame "the good life" bear directly on the kinds of schooling and the kinds of miseducation that we so widely enjoy--including the ways that we way we develop or beleaguer academic talent. Clearly, implications about the terms of economic contest and the misconstruction of the good life pertain to those whom we suspect as harboring lots of academic talent. Clearly, implications abound for the rural places and communities whose economies and meanings are under perpetual assault.

Now: this kind of talk, which may seem beside the point to you, exactly centers the nine points I want to make today. I will actually list these points for you at the very end, so you do not miss them in the flow of mere speech.

Despite this chutzpah, at the outset I want to admit that I have no particular claim to knowing the one-and-only-best truth about rural lifeways and habits of knowing. I didn't grow up farming, my mother wasn't a coal miner or a country singer, and we weren't dirt poor. I grew up in a part of New Jersey that,

within my lifetime, has been converted from dairy, chicken, and truck farming to tract housing and to now vacant but expensive land.

My parents were teachers. My father's extended family was Catholic and very much part of the industrial proletariat. My mother's protestant parents were individualistic, classic petty bourgeoisie--they owned a bookstore before the depression and after it operated a small-town accounting business. According to Bourdieu, who was writing about France and not about North America, this background makes me part of the ruling class; it makes all of us part of the ruling class. I don't buy it myself.

On the other hand, on April 27, 1973, Aimee and I moved our six-month old daughter from the urbanized Philadelphian northeast to Appalachia and have stuck there ever since. It was a turning point in our lives, and because I'm really more stupid--or at least more troubled--than Aimee, my best education has come out of that choice and the subsequent experience of it, in all its contradictory and ironic complexity.

Nothing in my life so far has been more difficult than leaving that place, in 1983, and moving to the West Virginia state capital to pursue the careers that have led us, well, to Iowa City on May 21, 1999.

For about half those 26 years, Aimee and I have been able to raise large gardens, keep hogs and chickens, and sometimes cows or goats. And we've been poor and desperate. We can tell you

that being desperate is a bad, bad place to be, though poverty by itself is tolerable. Once more, for the time being and with fingers crossed, we are caring for a small farm. It's about one-tenth the size of our West Virginia farm, and yet has about 10 times as much arable land.

Nothing that I do is more meaningful than the dirt-work that, on average, returns about 4 dollars' benefit per hour of labor. Indeed, in farming generally, 4 dollars an hour **net** is a great success, as many of you probably know all too well. In a 20-hour day, 365 days a year, that would almost amount to a living family wage. Think of it.

Well, what I think is that the enterprise that practically all Americans consider to be farming, to the extent that they know anything about it, is really a complex system to transfer capital accumulated by previous generations of farmers to other places in the economy--say to Microsoft, Inc., or one of the many learning enterprises of the junk-bond felon, Michael Milken, who is investing big-time in education according to a report in *The Nation*. Milken, of course, is godfather to the "Milken Family Foundation." Isn't that brilliant, giving megabucks in order to associate his name with the F word?

Gene Logsdon, who writes about small-scale contrarian farming, says you're more likely to live a decent life by combining small-scale farming with another career than by trying to wrest a meager living out of a thousand acres and a debt of

many hundreds of thousands of dollars. You'll also be kinder to the land, and less likely to squander the earth over which you should be acting as a steward. Note that this view goes right back to the Matthew principle.

These initial musings lead directly into the substance of this little talk, and they link the ideas of why on earth we might want special programs for academically very capable kids and what that desire might have to do with (a) a better world and (b) rural places. I've been thinking about these relationships for months, waking in the middle of the night to test various stories that feature ideas as the main characters and might work to explain things to the wisely skeptical.

So this is the way I want to proceed. First, I'm gonna talk about academic talent, distinguish it from the wilderness of talents that we imagine to constitute gifts, defend it as important and needful to address in its somewhat extreme manifestations as well as in its typical manifestations, and give you the cheap and easy way to accommodate unusual degrees of academic talent in rural schools, and mostly I'm thinking about small rural schools in places with distinctly modest economies.

Second, I'm gonna talk about the relationship of academic talent to a better world. This entails some assertions about the nature of US schooling in general, who controls it, what its alleged leaders falsely imagine the good life to be, what the good life might consist of alternatively, and, finally, a couple

of reasons academic talent--ordinary school cleverness and quickness and nothing fancy--just might be more suited to the struggle for the good life than to the struggle to turn many quick bucks and retire soon to a gated town where the good manifests itself mostly as golf.

Anyway, understanding these two strands--academic talent and the issue of the good life--will help you grasp my rural comments. So part three will concern possibilities for the good life in rural places and a rural sort of schooling in which academic talent accommodates rather than subverts or frustrates such possibilities.

Academic Talent

Aimee and I were lounging around one morning recently thinking about the meaning our kids were making of their young adult lives, and I asked her what had given her satisfaction as a young adult. She said it was some combination of relationship, family, and ideology.

The combination explains our involvement with gifted education, and it's an experience that lots of special ed parents share. It made no sense to **us**, who had learned something about testing, that our oldest kid who read at the 8th grade level should sit disengaged and apathetic in the 3rd grade classroom. All we ever wanted was for her to be in the fourth grade, the sixth grade, skip high school altogether. That didn't seem to us

so very much to ask. It was appropriate, effective, and dirt-cheap. If there were a better combination of educational strategies we still haven't heard of them.

Our local educators, in a very rural district, of course, were appalled at these demands. And we did make demands, without stint, and without smarts. The bureaucracy of gifted education and special education wasn't just not helpful, it was obstructionist. We were told to tend to social-emotional concerns first, to consider creativity, and preparation for leadership. It's not what we wanted to hear. We made enemies. We didn't care... and that, as I have said, is dangerous.

To this day, however, academic talent is the only form of giftedness that interests me. I am not interested in the socially gifted, the creatively gifted, or the leadership-edly gifted. Not that I disparage creativity or friendliness but rather because we do one another much harm when we conflate the narrow term "gifted" with such fine Jane-Austen-like qualities as "wise," "amiable," or "courageous." When we do this we are acting like those poor souls who fetischize test results. I'm talking about all those phony scientists whom Steve Gould unmasks in *The Mismeasure of Man*, a great book to read if you are working with uncommonly clever kids and their commonly vain parents.

It's enough that we should seek out and accommodate the academically quick and clever with quite modest adjustments in curriculum and instruction. We haven't done even that well

enough or widely enough, though we've been at it now for almost a century.

All this means not only do I have **no quibble** with IQ testing **solely for this purpose** (that is, adjusting the pace of instruction), but I also think such proxies as grades, rating scales, and the averaging of unlike and irrelevant factors (as in multi-dimensional assessments) are wildly inadequate to the task. They do more harm than good.

Many of you will not agree, I know. In truth, this is not a politically correct position for a leftist. Liberals are supposed to **approve** Howard Gardner. However, if you know just a little bit of the history of this field, you'll see Gardner's lineage in the progression from Spearman to Thorndike to Thurstone to Guilford and back again. One, four, eight, or 120 abilities, take your pick, the idea is the same and so are its misuses.

The misuses, again, have to do with conflating all things wise and wonderful with the educational determination "gifted." Such misuses reinforce the separation of lead and gold, goats and sheep, black and whites, poor and rich and then stigmatizing lead, goats, blacks, and the poor. In fact, if you ask me, lead and goats, blacks and the poor are more useful and wonderful than the rich.

We can avoid the misuses if we stick to the issue of the

pacing of instruction, or more broadly the idea that gifted kids should usually complete 13 years of schooling in 10 or fewer. This was Julian Stanley's guideline, I think. I didn't pull it out of a hat.

If we don't stick to the straight and narrow, we're off on the misguided quest for virtue supposedly inherent in one or many test scores. And we'll inevitably find that Australian aborigines, American Indians, blacks **even when mostly white**, and in some accounts also women, are less virtuous than white Anglo-Americans, especially us men who drive Lincolns, play golf on Tuesdays and ask for our scotch straight up.

There's an exception therefore to my general conservatism on this issue of narrow constructionism: I am not positioned to articulate any opinion on schooling at last designed by the very people upon whom white Anglo-Americans have practiced actual genocide and slavery. What they might want to do **with**, **through**, or **for** their children in order to overcome the evil legacies we have visited upon them is, finally, their own business. They've paid the price necessary to tell us to "butt out." For instance, Indians seem to want to use gifted education funds from the feds and SEAs to develop tribal leadership. Jim Gallagher would say this made sense. I just don't know enough to have an opinion.

But as white Americans started talking about the need to use gifted ed funds to develop rural leadership, I'll rail against it

as yet another ploy to suck capital and meaning from rural places. I'd advise instead that the consideration and cultivation of rural leadership needs to involve all rural kids and rural adults. It would be ethically wrong to construe such a venture as proper instruction for the gifted when all could benefit from it.

At the same time, I'm skeptical past the point of disbelief of the concept of "leadership." Why are there so many books about leadership these days? From my perspective, they exist to validate the power of the institutions doing us the most damage--Microsoft, Archer-Daniels Midland, Walt Disney, and so forth. I was appalled to see Gardner come out with a book on leadership, because it could have been predicted; leadership is becoming the ultimate virtue, and, by abandoning IQ tests as the measure of virtue, Gardner's commitment to the elite required that he invent a replacement. Leadership is a predictable replacement part. No matter what, we gotta keep that sorting machine working. And you thought Gardner was opposed to the sorting machine, didn't you?

But let's return to the beginning.

As you may remember, Alfred Binet constructed the first test of academic talent. He wanted to help kids among whom the pacing of the usual curriculum might be troublesome. Perhaps his was the simplest and best insight, both among his predecessors and among his successors. His predecessors wanted to prove that people of color were savages and that Britain should rule the

waves and everything touched **by the waves thus ruled.** Binet's successors in both Germany and the US wanted, probably spurred by envy, to prove that Jews were inferior. And nearly everyone has wanted to show that the rich actually deserve the great privileges they enjoy. Analyses of IQ test results are used this way still. Binet, though, was French and perhaps that gave him the advantage.[3]

With Herrnstein and Murray so popular that the Dalton and Walden chains carried them, or should I say "it"?, in malls nationwide, we must conclude that many Americans want to continue hearing that Black folk and the working class are, on all counts, inferior to rich white folk.

Please note that all these horrific ideas have very little to do with what is, essentially, a game of 20 questions. The game is appropriate only when it sticks to the mismatch between quick and clever students and the pace of the curriculum usually thrown at them. The proper use of ability testing is much, much more narrow than most people any longer allow.

The upshot, naturally enough, is that educationists want to abandon ability testing altogether, and for any purpose. It makes a certain amount of sense, but only if you give up the idea that academic talent is variously and not uniformly manifest.

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[3] Think about it. Think of Sartre & deBeauvoir, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu. The French have maintained a rather stunning philosophical tradition, while the rest of the Western

Why any teacher would conclude, however, that academic talent is uniformly manifest is simply beyond comprehension, of course. By the way, our little team favors local norms to identify the top 3 or 5 percent of academic talent in all schools. We don't like to see 25% of kids in one school and 0% in another identified as gifted. Giftedness is a relative concept, that's what the "Q" in "IQ" means.

Well, considering all of this misuse, confusion, misunderstanding, and bad purposes, it's no wonder IQ is in such hot water. It surprised me to learn, even as long ago as 15 years, that in educational research the use of IQ as a control variable is now regarded as impolite. More recently, last month in fact, I heard a pretty well known researcher explain just what things **that money could buy** actually did influence achievement, according to a meta-analysis he had done. This excellent researcher displayed a transparency that showed something called "teacher's verbal ability" as the most influential among the items on his list. Ought-oh. He had a bunch of these transparencies and it rather looked like he had pulled out the **wrong one**. He tried clumsily and with some irony to explain what "verbal ability" was to the audience, started down a path he thought better of after having taken a few steps, and moved into

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world has announced a near-death experience for philosophy.

the next transparency. It was comic. I laughed out loud. Nobody else, of course, saw the joke.

Afterward, we talked. "Isn't it funny," said I, "how we **can't talk about** IQ any longer." It wasn't a question. He said, "Right: it's not permissible. Bad form." The implication to be drawn, by the way, from this chap's meta-analysis is that we need to have lots of **academically capable** kids go into teaching. In fact, we gotta have lots of bright and caring and wise kids go into the teaching of poor kids. Kind of makes sense, doncha think? But do you think this is likely? Nope, no one's paying attention, and, teaching, after all, is not glamorous.

In any case, three tendencies have converged to produce a severe political problem in gifted education. First, we have not kept to a narrow definition of academic talent. Second, we have not been content to nurture academic talent, but have insisted we could tackle any talent whatsoever. Third, we have quite unhappily argued that these extraordinarily but variously talented kids are the "nation's most precious natural resource."

This last one always elicits a loud "Veyz Mir!" from Aimee and me.

Given the coincidence of affluence and academic talent, the corollary of this position very indelicately says that the **ruling class**[4] is the nation's most precious natural resource.

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[4] I saw a bumper sticker that read: "The ruling class--the other white meat."

It's an attitude that we now sadly tolerate in America. The great sociologist Christopher Lasch said America was the victim of a coup--the "Revolt of the Elites." The elite, the ruling class, no longer wish to preside over a democracy. Ever wonder why we now fight wars, but don't declare war? Democracy's too messy.

Let me now summarize the status of academic talent in American schooling. First, let's observe that the idea behind these distortions of our field seems to have been to substitute socially useful talents (useful, that is to the rich and the powerful) for a socially and perhaps politically dubious one (academic talent) in order to build a base of political support that might fund programs for the gifted (thus redefined).

Second let us observe that the distortions have worked in many places, actually, and thus made it quite difficult to practice an academically oriented form of schooling for academically quite talented kids.

Third, by too often imagining inappropriate futures for gifted kids (or, futures that mirror the aspirations of the elite cadres that are working to further subvert democratic interests in the US), the field has made a small contribution to the decline of concern for the common good.

So far, so good. But what exactly is "academic talent"?

At this juncture, then, let's take a closer look at academic talent.

To describe academic talent more precisely, we'll consult the less-is-more guy, Ted Sizer, he of the Coalition-of-Oh-So-Essential-Schools. The curriculum that encompasses academic talent, the one for which even he, sworn enemy of the misuse of testing for accountability programs, **solidly endorses state-administered standardized, norm-referenced testing** is this:

careful reading,
clear writing, and
mathematics through statistics and calculus.

Sizer actually calls the latter part of the curriculum "computational mathematics through statistics and probability." In doing so, I suspect he is revealing his own limited mathematical fluency, because nothing about mathematics is merely computational, and it's so nice to see the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics say so, out loud, in public.

Anyhow, if you're familiar with the Binet and Wechsler tests, this curriculum will look familiar. It's the core school knowledge and when it stops being the core school knowledge, we'll all be in even bigger trouble than we already are.

In order to know who might move very slowly or very quickly through this "core" stuff, we have to have a sufficiently predictable curriculum so that what it is (its usual scope) and the order of teaching teach it (its usual sequence) is sufficiently familiar to be, almost, taken for granted.

In fact, Sizer's standard curriculum now manifests itself similarly the globe over. John Meyer says so, and I believe him. Worse still, Larry Cuban says schooling hasn't changed much since 1900, and I believe him as well. Theoretically, we know what we're doing with clear writing, careful reading, and mathematics through statistics and calculus. We don't manage to do it very well or very often or for very many people, but we've got a widely validated scope and sequence that comes off around the world, and probably on other planets, too.

Now, since Sizer claims, like me, to be a localist and an enemy of national and state standards, universal curriculum frameworks, and accountability fascism of all flags, I'm particularly impressed at his support of standardized norm-referenced testing in these domains. It makes sense to me too, and it makes sense to me that we might want to discover who has the potential to get through that stuff fast. I don't exactly know why, except that the institution of schooling is not very hospitable to the life of the mind, which is the life you can

more easily lead if you can read carefully, write clearly and think with math. Again, kids who have some demonstrable talent for that stuff are the ones I want to call gifted, and nobody else.

But what about wisdom, amiability, and courage? The very qualities the incomparable Jane Austen would approve in her best protagonists. Don't I **want** to encourage them among the gifted? You bet, or as we say in Appalachia, yeah-boy.

This is where thoughtfulness about the good life comes in. The IQ fetischists and the leadership people, in my retelling anyhow, are looking for overarching virtue, somewhat quick fixes and **partially comforting one-best-answers** to the chancy business of living. Because virtue is so much more complicated and ambiguous a quest than swallowing a one-best-answer pill, those of us who admire Lao Tzu, Jesus, Plato, Jane Austen, Hannah Arendt, and Wendell Berry must alternately laugh and weep to the point of exhaustion.

Let's face it, though, we're all interested, in some way, in virtue. For instance, Bill Bennett, first a philosophy professor (or so it's rumored), then Ronald Reagan's secretary of education, and then George Busch's chief drug thug, also proclaims his support of virtue. In his scheme, however, virtue is a reflex action more than an act of care and attention.

Lessons about virtue are for children. Once the lessons are learned, we can expect such children to be virtuous without a thought in their heads. Having learned the lessons, adults would be free to do as they please, in safety. That's the theory. It seems to me a recipe for ethical disaster. Dr. Bennett also seems to believe we can avoid cultural disaster this way.

Just notice at this point that care and attention are part of what students should be learning in the standard core curriculum--**careful** reading; **clear** writing; and mathematical **ideas**. **To learn**, in other words, you must pay attention. **To teach**, you must pay attention. **To act ethically**, you must pay attention. Paying attention, in fact, **constitutes** one dimension of care. Much of the evil in the world, and Hannah Arendt observed this famously about the Adolf Eichmann trial, is sponsored by the way we construct, or focus, a world of **inattention**.

Gifted children, however, aren't any better at paying attention. They just have the predicted ability to "get" **faster** what seems, in fact, to require **more attention** from others. And therein lies the ethical danger. Without some change in their schooling, you might conclude, as I in fact have, that academically talented kids are at **greater ethical risk** than

other kids. Without a faster pace, they usually get good grades with little or not effort, risking nothing, and paying very little attention. And this is the ethical reason that they should be much more sharply challenged in school than they usually are. Without accelerating them, we reward them for being lazy, we allow them to believe that success is not only an entitlement but an end in itself, for what else would they conclude if they have no work to do? Worst of all we nurture their expectation of unearned privilege by such a regime of schooling.

So let them demonstrate some reasonable mastery of the core curriculum quickly. If they learn that life requires hard work, they'll be prepared for a real education, and their schooling will have helped them to take that next step. This sounds like school improvement to me, and I'm certain it actually happens from time to time.

What able kids do next, after they zip through the core curriculum, is where the substantive issues of virtue mostly come in, and where, with us as matters mostly now stand, the issue of virtue founders. Academic accomplishment relates to virtue only if we bend it that way. But the institution of schooling most commonly bends academic accomplishment toward greed. Now let's consider the good life.

The Good Life

A while back I picked up a copy of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's interesting book, *Flow*. The author might be vaguely familiar to some of you because he worked with Getzels, the **good** creativity guy. Anyway, Csikszentmihalyi wrote *Flow* in order to popularize the findings of his research into creativity. It turns out, though, that he's written a book on the meaning of life that we Anglo-Americans might actually understand.

It's about the pursuit of happiness, actually. According to *Flow*, you are doomed to failure in this pursuit if you go for happiness directly. Happiness is something you can experience only indirectly. Fixate on happiness as the thing lacking in your life, and you are sure to find misery. You can't buy happiness, but you do have to work for it.

Csikszentmihalyi's message is based on observations of people working to make and do things--artists, writers, cabinet makers, athletes--whatever you like, I guess. It reports a feeling of well-being experienced only when people are absorbed in the care and attention they direct to their work, specifically to the work of making something or perfecting a performance.

Csikszentmihalyi's descriptive term for this feeling is, as you might suspect, "flow." It's the feeling of **being in the groove**, doing what you know how to do with such concentration that your surroundings seemingly vanish and you find yourself in an imaginative realm of challenge, pleasure, and not infrequent elation. In fact, you forget yourself and become your work.

"Flow" is a heightened sense, one might say, of care and attention, but one with stimulating levels of stress. Csikszentmihalyi shows how people experience flow, even how they crave it. Flow, in short, is the condition for happiness. And work is the condition of flow.

This is difficult stuff, people! In order to be happy, we need a work. But in America we have reviled work. "Work-ugh!" is what many have come to think. This happens mainly because we conflate job-holding with work and we **contrast and separate** work and play, so that play becomes inaccessible, even forbidden, within work.

Now, the way we think about jobs--as something hateful--and the way we think about work--as something different from play--means that few of us think about having a work first and a job second. Because we associate happiness with play, and because we believe that the toys we buy will make us happy, we deny ourselves the possibility of a happy work. The truth is that

our work ought to come first, and then our jobs. If we thought this way more commonly, more of us might be enabled to settle on jobs that accord in some measure with the work we do. Finding a work is something your education should help you to do, but it should also help you distinguish between job-holding and Real Work, which is something I've never heard that schooling does. This is a difficult task for schooling because it would require skepticism about the whole prospect of merely holding a dreary job. One way forward is to unmask the American misconstruction of happiness.[5]

I once read that all parents want their children to be happy. The source was some propaganda for teachers, as I seem to recall. The claim brought me up short. All parents? Is that what I wanted for my own kids? For them to be happy?

It would be **nice** if they were **happy**, I remember thinking. But it seemed that whether or not they actually **were** happy was pretty much none of my damned business.

Who knows why people get happy? Maybe they're slap-happy, maybe they're happy drunk, maybe they've happy they've snatched a purse, or maybe they're happy watching a sitcom. Some of those states are all right, I guess, but you have to admit they

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[5] With all of this subtle stuff, an indirect approach is the only one possible. Aiming to teach students methods of finding a Real Work would be a great mistake.

don't amount to much. Misery, on the other hand, is quite thoroughly disabling.

So, on further reflection, I decided that I didn't really care whether or not my kids were happy, I just wanted them **not to be miserable**. Wishing for them not to be miserable maintains a respectful distance, and offers an observation they can use: watch out for misery. When you're miserable, your mind is trying to tell you something. On your part, you should try to listen.

This epiphany about happiness and child rearing hit me about 12 years ago, long before I read *Flow*, but just in time for me to start using this line with all three of our kids. At first they were offended that I didn't care about their happiness. But I didn't let up. The more they heard the story, the less offended they grew. They had, after all, observed my adult misery and recovery up close, and were probably predisposed to think I was on to something.

And once misery began to arrive in their own emerging adult lives in significant ways, I think they began to understand; at least they felt they could talk with us about the issues of misery, the search for good work, and the meaning of life.

Where does this leave us? First, **the pursuit of happiness**

is indirect, and second, **the work you do constitutes who you are.**

We just saw a brilliant black comedy titled simply "Happiness." We recommend it, though beware that black comedy views all humans as worms and its images can be offensive. Anyway, in this film, the sole, marginally redeemable adult character is considered (quote) a loser (unquote) by her despicable family, which kibitzes constantly about her fate, feeling superior at every juncture. This supposed loser nonetheless actually does stuff of which she makes some limited sense, like write songs for instance. Her sister, an internationally published award-winning poet, is venal, selfish, and false by comparison. The "loser" has a dumb job and decides she's wasting her life. So she signs up to teach at a refugee center. One sister says, of the teaching job, "She wants to do good." The other, the false poet, with charming phoniness, says, "She doesn't have to **do good**, she **is good**."

I was ready to say "bingo."

These two points seem like simple enough propositions, but if you apply them to society, if you apply them to **our** nationally fabricated society, you arrive at disturbing corollaries. Some of these corollaries might be:

1. The meaning of life is happiness.
2. Everyone wants to be happy.
3. The good life is a happy life.
4. You can buy happiness.
5. You can make money selling happiness.
6. Making money brings happiness.

Wendell Berry, the eloquent philosopher-poet of rural life, in his book *The Hidden Wound*, pages 65-70, gives the extended version of this logic, with such grace and force that you are not likely to remain unchanged if you read it.

Now, this logic is nasty enough as an account of how it is that we come to avoid good work and take up bad work, and in so doing implement evil agendas, and actually end up miserable.[6] But we must remember that this chain of evil-doing is not merely the result of unencumbered choice, but rather the imposition of an economic system geared to amass great wealth without much

[6]The logic here suggests a complete psychology of political economic life as experienced inwardly and in isolation by most citizens. We are "colonized" and "dominated" by bad ideas, which motivate us to take dumb jobs and spend like crazy on stuff we don't need, under the illusion that we are "pursuing happiness." Schooling reinforces the system (in the case of most students) and the ultimate beauty of this form of social control is that only a few people, mostly from elite backgrounds, are equipped to understand this dodge. This circumstance, I think, is what Berry (1977/1996) means by a world that has become "mind-dominated."

regard for the damage done to nature, society, or ethics--that is, to conceptions of the good life.

So what **is** "the good life," so called? Before it is anything else, I believe it is an abstraction. It may in fact be little more than an abstraction, and it is most useful as an abstraction. People should be bent on living a good life, but living well--actually realizing a decent life in the flesh--is an idiosyncratic matter. It can come about by chance or even through tradition, which is a kind of lack of chance. I think the odds of this now happening by chance or tradition are somewhat lower than formerly. And since we have systematically destroyed much that constituted tradition in the name of the happy dollar, the odds for the traditional route are even worse than via pure chance.[7]

What is the alternative? How might we arrive at better lives, individually and in common? If you're listening more carefully than I imagine is possible, the phrase I just used--"people should be bent on living a good life"--may echo here. "Bending" is one meaning of the word "education." Education should bend us, should bend our children, towards a

[7] I don't intend, however, that you conclude the past was better, more just, or less violent than the present. Recall especially that genocide against the Indians and the enslavement of Africans took place on rural ground. The way forward is **certainly not** to turn back the clock.

consideration of the good life. I am not one of those who, like Bill Bennett, believes that the good life can be successfully realized through the simple inculcation and repetition of what one sect, or many, or what one political party or both, may temporarily regard as eternal verities.

There is also a distinction to be made between mere schooling and education. John Goodlad says we are too much schooled and too little educated. The television--and the computer the more it comes to resemble television--are the chief institutions of education anymore. But I don't think the wise response is to impose more schooling.

On this issue, I side with those people, a short list that includes no one I actually know, who favor **less schooling altogether**. I cannot see that most humans need to spend more than 8 years in school. Very academically talented people do not need to acquire doctorates; they don't need to go to college; and if they are really, really smart they might choose not to finish high school, at least not in the ordinary way.

If this sentiment shocks you, and you want me to put my life where my mouth is, then consider this: each of our three abundantly academically talented kids is a high school dropout. With our blessing, our admiration, and, sure, a bit of low-key encouragement. You can ask either Aimee or me about this later

if you like. All I want to suggest is that life is full of good alternatives that violate common sense.[8]

And that--the plentitude of fine alternatives that violate common knowledge (or common sense, so-called)--is exactly my point about the good life as needful of thought-out consideration. The Bill Bennetts of this world would have us return to a "golden age" of greater virtue. Actually, the return would not be to an actual golden age, which never existed, but to a manufactured image of comparative tranquility, virtue, and order. Neither history, nor economics, nor the physics of time and space work this way, of course. The world is a troubled place and if there ever were simple answers to complicated questions--which anyone who reads the great fiction and philosophy of the past millennium must sharply doubt—you can't find them today. The only alternative is to read, to ponder, to join with others and see what the dimensions of "the good life" might look like.

Keeping Them on the Farm

And this brings me home to my rural theme. Now, some people who were raised rural question my sanity in espousing

[8] You need to be skeptical when people start yapping about (quote) losers (unquote) and (quote) common sense (unquote).

rural life as harboring much needful good. They think that folks like Wendell Berry and Gene Logsdon and Helen and Scott Nearing and all the others who have seen the good life in rural locales and claim to have lived or to try to be living it there are charlatans. They suspect that, even thinking this way, that is, a way that privileges rural, one could nevertheless not **be** rural if not raised rural, or that if one **were** raised rural, one must not have experienced **the real grit** of rural poverty. For these critics, the meanings of rural seem to be:

bigotry, misogyny, abject poverty, and ignorance.

I regret that these folks, colleagues in the ed business, had difficult rural upbringings. Moreover, the desire to escape these evils is understandable, but in truth, you will find such evils everywhere. You may as well confront them where they find you.

Observe, for instance, that **cosmopolitanism** might be said to have complementary evils: idolatry, misanthropy, abject affluence, and craven expertise. Observe also that some naive city-dwellers, wishing to escape the urban evils, have moved to the country, only to discover, to the surprise of their naivete, that **other set of evils**.

There is a rural lesson here: The lesson is that rural is no more an idyll than the city. Life is a struggle anywhere, and you will as readily find evil in the country as in the city. The presence of evil does not usually eliminate the possibility of a good life, and certainly not the consideration of the good life.

Life in a rural place is only one eventuality that the good life might take, of course, but it would seem that this particular eventuality should be, not simply **germane to rural people**, but dear to our hearts. If our general work as humans is to pursue the good life, why not pursue it where we are? In fact, that is all we can **ever** do. Of course, where one is, is partly a matter of imagination. The trick is to imagine the good life where we happen to be, if, in fact, we are attached to where we are and to what is to be done there in favor of living decent lives and in favor of consideration of the good life. These ideas are far more difficult than such simple words suggest. In our last book we quoted Frank Moretti, whom I believe is a high school teacher, or was, on the purpose of education. Moretti wrote about the purpose of education:

> I say that each person under the best circumstances **takes up the challenge of learning what he or she has become without having chosen it** and in the process sees new worlds and lays claim to a new freedom.

You can do this anywhere, and must. We all do it to some limited extent, whatever the misconstructions of our schooling.

But what is rural? And what might it have to do with all this fancy philosophizing?

I attended a rural special ed conference in 1986, at which I heard for the first time the bizarre assertion that (quote) rural no longer means agriculture (unquote). I was offended to hear this said in such ignorance by so many people who were actually clueless about farming and who professed concern for rural life. But the ad nauseam repetition of this observation, with seldom a shred of interpretation continues to sicken me.

Yes, we do have to face the fact that very few people are earning much of a living farming these days. In Ohio, which one might regard in the same light as Iowa--a kind of quintessential farming state--the Economic Research Service of the USDA does not identify a single county as "agriculture-dependent." Travel the state and this determination is sure to baffle you.

On the other hand, what exactly does rural mean if not agriculture, which people continue to pursue, despite the growing phenomenon of what our friends at the USDA call "off-farm employment"? The basic statistics are pretty interesting.

Do you realize that 75 percent of all US farms are classified as "noncommercial," meaning they produce *gross sales* under $50,000? More telling is the fact that the *average income* of these "noncommercial" farm families is $35,000, **but virtually all of it is from off-farm income** (United States Department of Agriculture, 1993).

Now let's look at the situation for the "commercial" operations. **Fully half** of their income comes from off-farm sources. In fact, only 8 percent **of farmers** nationwide are making a **whole living** by farming.

This is the reason that the USDA is getting people all over rural America to say rural no longer means farming. Farming no longer wields the combination of political mass and dispersed economic influence it once did. So the USDA is going just for the big bucks. Partly what they're telling us is that they want to take the USDA out of the rural life business. **Whose USDA do you suppose this is**? Right--ADM's, Cargill's, Disney's. This development--the theft of agriculture--is consistent with the American conception of pursuing happiness to the point of

boredom and eventual death. If we repeat the nostrum that rural no longer means agriculture, we're swallowing the line that rural belongs to the national economy, which ought to exploit it in the interest of global competitiveness--whatever it takes.

Take the trees; take the minerals; take the topsoil; take the kids; take the school; take the whole damn community. Turn it all into air-conditioning.

But if you look at the picture from the popular view, that is from the perspective of all those noncommerical farmers, and the majority of the commercial ones as well, something else besides profitability is going on here. Something astonishing.

In my own rural, Appalachian county back in Ohio, the average farm has sales of $8,437 and expenses of $8,465. The average farm breaks even: that's quite an accomplishment, isn't it? Breaking even is actually good news. And they're doing it with an average capitalization in machinery and equipment of just about $21,000. A little more ingenuity and social capital, which would of course include market structures quite different from the ones small producers now confront, and our local hill-farmers would make a little money. Some, of course, already do.

In the heartland of the greediest nation on earth, this is a sort of unremarked **miracle**. People are working hard, and yet half of these folks have a "principal occupation" other than

farming. A lot of imagination goes into this seemingly unprofitable work.

Now, the USDA and the IRS, in our nation's capital, would like to maintain that most of this activity is the hobby of idiots, you know, those worst and dumbest folks abandoned by the best and brightest who have sensibly moved to Chicago, Des Moines, and Cleveland--or worse places. This is the logical conclusion to be drawn from the national pursuit of happiness. The work and the relationships and meanings prized by rural folks are trivialized as hobbies (bootless consumption instead of stewardly production) and ultimately dismissed as depraved ignorance. The history of viewing rural areas this way is ancient.

Many of us put a different spin on it, of course. We think that most of these folks farm for the rarely appreciated pleasures related to a land ethic. We think more people need to farm, not fewer. We think that the transformation of rural communities into industrial outposts has been a disaster not just for rural places, but for rural meanings, for the very idea of community, and perhaps for the nation as a whole. Some of us think that almost everything in America needs to be smaller. The reason I think that, is so that proper care and attention can be paid.

Keeping Them Farming

Now let us, at last, put unusual academic talent, the good life, and a rural living together. "How to keep them on the farm when you can't even keep farming" is the question. The way forward is pretty simply stated, and I've almost said, though not in so many words. The only thing is, that my counsel goes almost completely against the traditional American way, at least as critically described by the rural folks whom I most admire, some of whom will speak tomorrow.

Brace yourselves, now, for some very idiosyncratic advice about gifted kids who happen to live in rural places. Recently I wrote that not only were our three kids all high school dropouts, but that we were real proud that none of them had gone to an elite college. Before I launch into this stuff, I just want you to know that I'm not asking others to do anything with kids that we haven't done with our own, more or less.

First, however, let me lay out for you what parents, friends, relatives, colleagues, and parents of gifted kids with whom we have worked want, generally, for these kids. They want them, generally, to be happy, to get 4.0 GPAs, to score well on the ACT or SAT, go to an elite school, make socially useful connections there, and then become a physician, lawyer, stock-

broker, or some other sort of brilliant moneymaker. They also, once again in general, want them to graduate with their age-grade cohorts and they especially do not want their children skipping any high school. The reason for this latter wish is that a normal high school experience is understandably one in which such children will generally excel and is considered part of the ticket to an elite future. Now this is just my biographical experience as such a kid, growing up in New Jersey, but I've seen the same syndrome in West Virginia and Ohio, and this suggests that the generality often bears out when we get down to particulars.

This is not, of course, what I think we should generally want for our gifted kids, especially gifted kids in rural schools. Many of you won't agree, I know.

Instead of expecting A's, we should want them to work hard at learning challenging academic material. We should be happy to see them earn B's and even to fail once in a while. Instead of being happy, we should want them to look for a Real Work while staying pretty much clear of misery, though a couple of short doses of misery can be a very a good thing indeed.

Instead of doing well on the ACT or SAT, we should want them to finish school so early that if they take those tests at the age of 12 or 13 they'll look like average 17-year-olds so

far as the stupid test score goes.

Instead of going to an elite college, we should want them to spend several years groping around in the real world, looking somewhat lazily and mostly indirectly for a Real Work, and doing a lot of careful reading and maybe some informal learning about whatever strikes their fancy. They could have mentors in all of this--after the age of 12 or so--and that would be great. Especially if those mentors come from the working class in their own communities. But in my limited experience the best mentors are the ones one finds for oneself and who are filling the role but not playing it. Such mentorships are informal and very low-key. They're irregular.

Even under this ideal regime, I suspect that most gifted kids in rural places would end up going to college simply because academic talent implies, alas, the need of academic outlet. That outlet could, however, as easily find fulfillment locally as anywhere. Young people are not in a good position to realize this because we do not put them in such a position. It would be great, I think, to see gifted kids remain in rural communities and do what my neighbor does. He teaches math at the local high school and farms. He laughs and says he has to teach in order to support his farming 'habit.' There are lots of models like this in all our communities; and I bet some of

you are yourselves such models.

Like other kids, gifted kids don't **have to** go to college, however. And if they choose certain kinds of work, college might prove not only useless to them, but counterproductive. Besides, in the US, you can go to college anytime you please--pregnant, middle-aged, divorced, stressed-out, or all four at once. There's no real hurry.

"There's no real hurry"--that's a funny thing for someone who so consistently argues the necessity for accelerating gifted kids to say. The point about acceleration for gifted kids, however, is that it's **not hurrying them up**. Instead, it's accommodating better the ordinary business-as-usual schooling to what seems to apply in their case. If schools were more reasonable places, we might not need special programs for the gifted, but I'm inclined to think we would need them anyway. The reason for special treatment, and this is why I'm perfectly happy with housing gifted education within the special education monster, is that schools are usually such unreasonable places when it comes to kids who present unusual symptoms. They may be turning into unreasonable places absolutely, but a lot of rural schools strike me as still hospitable, and the reason is often that they have fewer illusions than suburban schools and unlike city schools, an enduring place (earth, community, relatives) at

their center. I don't particularly buy the idea that the best and brightest leave rural communities, by the way. I see an awful lot of local talent in rural places. And virtue, too. So I regard the emigration of the best and the brightest from rural areas as an unproven theory. On the other hand, it seems likely that the most academically talented kids are at greater risk than other kids of being sucked into the American misconstruction of the pursuit of happiness, and **being thus sucked right out of** rural America, and this is what rural educators and communities might be interested to change.

However, I've already said that these kids aren't the most virtuous, or the best leaders, and that their talents are not all-encompassing. On these terms, therefore, I would not regard their loss to rural places as especially tragic. Indeed, if they have been schooled to greed, as I maintain often happens, rural communities would be well shut of them. I just don't see the sense in encouraging these kids above all others to leave. Careful readers, clear writers, and people confident with numbers are always needed when Real Work is to be done in rural places.

Logically, I should end here, but I promised to list the key points I claim to be making, and I've got a brief postscript as well.

The Points to Remember

1. Sidestep common sense and risk being a loser more often.

2. Concentrate on academic talent.

3. Help gifted kids finish 13 years of schooling in 10 or fewer.

4. Discount the value of a college education.

5. Stop promoting the pursuit of happiness; concentrate instead on promoting the pursuit of Real Work.

6. Consider the good life yourself; do some reading about this.

7. Talk about the good life, but if someone offers you a draft of hemlock, refuse it.

8. Understand the meanings of rural in your place; do some reading about this.

9. Promote the good life in your place as a rural work. Take some action to that end. Lick your wounds.

These projects ought to have you working overtime Monday morning.

Postscript

I want to leave you with an interesting quote from a bit of sociology done in 1946. It's from an article that Aimee used with her doc students recently, as an example of "functionalism." Functionalism is the approach underlying most

educational research. If you want to know why most educational research is so boring, "functionalism" is a possible short answer.

So, reading this article, one would not expect to happen upon anything particularly wild. And yet, there's something very wild there, looking back from the perspective we in 1999 hold on academic talent. Let me quote these guys, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore:

> In many cases . . . talent is fairly abundant in the population but the training process is so long, costly, and elaborate that relatively few can qualify. [Here comes the surprising part:] Modern medicine, for example, **is within the capacity of most individuals**, but a medical education is so burdensome and expensive that virtually none would undertake it if the position of the MD did not carry a reward commensurate with the sacrifice.

"Within the capacity of most individuals." Isn't that amazing? Today we hold the misconception that you gotta be a

genius to be a lousy doctor. The truth is that today you gotta be a genius to be a lousy farmer.

Think about it, and thanks for listening.

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